

Exploring academic careers through the metaphors of *doors* and *ladders*: A relational, feminist, and vulnerable approach

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Abstract

Building on Sara Ahmed's work on *use* and exploring the value of metaphors in theorizing organizational phenomena, this paper develops the metaphorical conceptualizations of *doors* and *ladders*, surfacing several complexities involved in women's academic careers in neoliberal workspaces. In doing so, it challenges the idea of linearity in academic career trajectories, underscoring the contested and constantly (re)negotiated dynamics and unfixed processes of both praxis and sensemaking in neoliberal academia. Empirically, we focus on the microlevel of organizing academic careers, sharing personal narratives nurtured by feminist vulnerability and facilitated through a relational autoethnographic approach. Contributing to critical approaches to academic careers, theoretically we articulate the conceptual relevance of *doors* and *ladders* in revealing the hidden dynamics therein, discussing the nuances of navigating the neoliberal academic professional context at different career stages. We consider the spatial and temporal dynamics of *doors* and *ladders*, their shifting and disorienting nature, offering visibility to the everyday experience of academic work.

Keywords

Academic careers, doors and ladders, feminist vulnerability, metaphors, neoliberal academia

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Introduction

The current neoliberal academic context is premised on the marketization of academic labor, the quantification of academic value and metric-driven processes, implicitly viewing higher educational institutions as businesses. This context is inspired by masculine ideologies and patriarchal notions of the “ideal worker” and scientist (Acker, 1990; Benschop and Brouns, 2003; van Den Brink and Benschop, 2013), which has been shaped by heteronormative, ableist, and whiteness¹ standards. Such patriarchal shaping creates a landscape of “dark academia” (Fleming, 2021), which has come to mean a context driven by economic interest, hyper-performativity, individualism and competition, where many colleagues, especially “othered” academics—usually those not abiding by hypermasculine, heteronormative standards and positioned at varying intersections of gender, race, class and tenure, among other identifiers of difference—become targets of discrimination and marginalization (Abdellatif et al., 2021). Academia thus becomes an organizational space of “collective depression” (Pereira, 2017), crisis-afflicted, and bound to collapse (Boncori, 2022; Izak et al., 2017). Avoiding any tendency to generalize the emergent learnings of our situated experiences, in this article, we write from *within* our respective positionalities *against* the contextual backdrop of certain neoliberal factors affecting academic work and careers, namely, linearity in career trajectories, hyper-performativity, workload and pace (Boncori et al., 2020). We do so by developing the feminist metaphorical associations of *doors* and *ladders*.

Scholars have long recognized metaphors in management and organization studies literature as critical tools for organizing knowledge and uncovering implicit meanings (Hatch and Yanow, 2008; Schwabenland, 2012). Metaphors can reveal new perspectives on familiar processes, shedding light on marginalized or disadvantaged viewpoints and helping to organize aspects of human experience differently (Cornelissen, 2004, 2005; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). For instance, academia is often represented as an “ivory tower” (Bourabain, 2021), disconnected from the rest of the world, limiting possibilities for career advancement and job satisfaction for “different others” through its invisible “glass ceiling” (Morley, 1994). Developing metaphors with feminist inspirations can illuminate complex processes of (in)equality at the intersections of various categories of difference, surfacing the experiences of vulnerable others in masculine workplaces (Ahmed, 2016). Through this quality, feminist metaphors can foster reflection and action (like magnifying lenses), highlighting the connections and inter-relationships traditionally underrated or ignored in academic life, researching and writing (Pullen, 2018).

Inspired by the power of metaphorical associations—such as *ivory tower* and *glass ceiling*—to offer alternative conceptual insights into complex processes of organizing, we draw here on Ahmed’s (2016, 2019) feminist discussion on *use*. Doing so, we develop a nuanced approach to metaphorical theorizing, exploring the *doors* and *ladders* we each navigate throughout our academic career trajectories. Going beyond metaphorical conceptualizations grounded in static descriptions and images of experiences and circumstances (the “what”), we offer an approach to conceptualization that uncovers the complex and shifting dynamics shaping everyday embodied experiences in academia. We introduce movement and temporality to our conceptualization of academic metaphors (the “how” and “when”) to address the complexity and the often-hidden dynamics of academic lives. By conceptualizing moving, shifting and interrelated metaphors, we seek to show the complexity of navigating academic careers outside of a simple linear system of career progression. As such, and as identified by one of our reviewers, our contribution to the critical literature on neoliberal academic careers (e.g. Hazelkorn, 2011; Robinson et al., 2023; Sai et al., 2024) lies in a conceptual development of the metaphors of doors and ladders as dynamic and shifting, thereby challenging simplistic linear views of traditional career paths as understood in various neoliberal academic contexts.

Empirically, we focus on the micro-level (i.e. individual everyday experiences) of organizational life, contributing to critical studies on academic careers by discussing the professional dynamics experienced by foreign women academics (Abdellatif et al., 2021; Johansson and Šliwa, 2014, 2014; Mandalaki and Prasad, 2024; Strauß and Boncori, 2020) at different career stages. We make visible our intersectional experiences of foreignness, seeking to “talk back” (Hooks, 1989) at the neoliberal forces marginalizing embodied differences in contemporary academia. To do so, we experienced our relational encounter (Meriläinen et al., 2022) by embracing *otherness* to counteract the normative (masculine) notions inhabiting academic life and work (Corlett et al., 2021). By writing (with and through) vulnerability in/through via three distinct, embodied narratives, developed through a relational autoethnographic approach (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; see also Kaasila-Pakanen et al., 2023), we address not only what is most difficult and disheartening in our academic experience, but also what is most satisfying and fulfilling (see also Sai et al., 2024).

In what follows, we first discuss the conceptual relevance of metaphors for organization studies, proposing *doors* and *ladders* as feminist metaphors to rethink academic careers. Second, we reflect on our positionalities, explaining how embracing feminist vulnerability has enabled affective sharing in our thinking/writing process, enriching our dialog and the conceptual development of academic *doors* and *ladders*. Third, we present our autoethnographic narratives, discussing specific situations, which, from our distinct positionalities, we each experienced as *doors* and/or *ladders*, and teasing out their spatial and temporal dynamics as they emerged. We conclude by summarizing our paper’s contributions to the feminist literature on intersectional women’s academic careers in neoliberal workspaces, to research on researching and writing differently, and to the literature using metaphors to conceptualize these processes.

Metaphors and feminist theoretical inspirations

Metaphors are used as means of organizing at both the individual and collective levels (see Schwabenland, 2012). Within organizational settings, metaphors are employed to aid sensemaking, render abstract ideas more familiar (Latusek and Vlaar, 2015; Oswick et al., 2002) and help translate implicit assumptions into more explicit concepts (Hatch and Yanow, 2008). As vehicles generating new ways of thinking and knowing, metaphors underwrite thinking about organizations and ways of organizing (Jermier and Forbes, 2016) “through the creative juxtaposition of [previously unrelated] concepts” (Cornelissen et al., 2005: 1547). Feminist authors have employed metaphors to illuminate experiences of epistemic oppression, seeking to “unsilence” vulnerabilities traditionally hidden within normative, neoliberal and masculine academic contexts (see for instance, Pérezts, 2022; Pullen, 2018). Doing so, they enable creative fissures/cracks in normative, conventional and “rigorous” theoretical and methodological narratives, offering conceptual disruptions as alternative embodied spaces for awareness that resist oversimplification (Schwabenland, 2012). Through their entailments, metaphors enable deeper learning, fermenting “reality” and shaping human thinking around diverse life events (Kendall and Kendall, 1993). Entwined with everyday organizational experiences, they offer a mirror for uncovering taken-for-granted assumptions, shedding light on underlying dynamics and relationships, objects and organizational actors, whereby similarities and differences are locked in tension (Cornelissen, 2005; Lakoff and Johnson, 2003).

In the context of academic careers, the edited volume on “Doing Academic Careers Differently” by Robinson et al. (2023) is in itself a metaphor for narrating academia, written and inhabited differently. The table of contents is visualized as a floorplan, and the many chapters are divided into rooms—for example, the “Meandering Gallery” or the “Haunted Gallery”—populated by different profiles of academics (e.g. “academic ghosts”) who explore how their careers may be done

differently. In the present paper, rather than focusing on the “galleries” of academic careers as spaces that people inhabit (permanently or temporarily), have reached, or have come across during their academic journeys, we focus on the spaces *in between* (e.g. the doors and ladders) that can lead to—or away from—places and opportunities, or can function as inhibitors and/or propellers in a career. As such, we understand *doors* and *ladders* as metaphors that refer to different aspects of academic work: job opportunities, challenges and obstacles, supporters and gatekeepers, neoliberal academic standards, career progression, networks, specific issues that are more prominent for some (i.e. racism, sexism), and personal matters (e.g. health issues or caring needs), *inter alia*.

We seek to extend the use and conceptualization of “static” metaphors, such as the “glass ceiling” or “ivory tower,” which often hide complexity within phenomena. For example, the known metaphor of the “glass ceiling” tends to be used to address issues at the highest career stage, leaving obscure the underlying complexities behind and below that hierarchical level. Similarly, the notions of the “maze” and the “labyrinth,” while conveying complexity and lack of direction, mainly denote the logic of a defined path between two points that needs to be discovered and navigated, rather than a series of shifting and changing paths requiring (re)interpretation and (re)negotiation. Given the dynamic character of academic careers at different stages, we suggest that a more nuanced and dynamic exploration of the academic career landscape is needed. Adding to metaphorical explorations of academic careers, we thus develop and explore the metaphors of *doors* and *ladders* as dynamic feminist concepts, shedding further light on the shifting, disorienting and unequal experiences of academia. We resonate with Robinson et al. (2023: 9), who refer to the potentially confusing and unsettling texture of the academic professional context:

This space is non-Euclidean, with distinct M.C. Escher-esque vibes. On the one hand, the room feels endlessly spacious, walls rising to cavernous heights lost in unfathomable darkness above, bending at impossible angles. On the other, its perspectives confuse the senses, making it make-like, mysterious. Passages run through it in all directions and along all planes. As you turn towards them, they acquire more clarity and solidity, and as you turn away, they fade or even disappear entirely.

To make sense of such complexity, we turn to Sara Ahmed’s perspectives on *use* (Ahmed, 2016, 2019) and her metaphor of “doors.” Rooted in feminist theory and sensibilities, Ahmed’s work deals with metaphorical associations of concepts and ideas as she “follows words around and about” (Ahmed, 2010, 2014, 2019). In *What’s the use?* (Ahmed, 2019), Ahmed articulates the politics and positionalities of *use*, *usage*, *use-ability* and the different applications of *use*, discussing how *use* is (unequally) distributed between objects and bodies in the social world. She critically questions the purpose of certain spaces, how spaces are used, in which direction and with(in) what timing. Importantly, for the feminist equity agenda, Ahmed (2019) addresses issues around power and access, discussing how certain words, objects or spaces are used (or not) to denote certain (“natural”) directions, while inhibiting others. Rallying these concepts, we extend the metaphor of *doors* and conceptualize the metaphor of *ladders* to charter a more nuanced understanding of contemporary academic careers within neoliberal masculine spaces. In our theorization, *doors* and *ladders* are affected by movement and temporalities, akin somewhat to dynamic visualizations in popular media that show how access and use can be confusing and challenging to adjust to. For example, in the Harry Potter movie series, the staircases in the school shift positions and direction; in the movie *Labyrinth*, the sections of the maze shift unpredictably in size, length and usability; in *Alice in Wonderland*, doors unexpectedly shrink to become small or expand to become enormous.

Our first metaphor refers to *doors*, which Ahmed (2019) posits “are not just physical things that swing on hinges; they are mechanisms that enable an opening and a closing” (p. 60). Ahmed builds

on Hamraie's (2017) call to "examine any doorway . . . [in order to] find the outline of the body meant to use it" (p. 19), critiquing how "normative templates" of usage traditionally shape the usability conditions of objects and spaces. Ahmed (2019) thus interrogates the "difficult-to-use doors" to unveil the hidden power dynamics that hinder accessibility to certain spaces for some (but not for *others*). For example, elaborating on the gender signs indicated on bathroom doors, she explores how certain artifacts might shape the usability of social spaces in ways that often transform doors into barriers, restricting access to conforming "normal" bodies. Gates then become fixed walls, excluding the marginalized, isolated individuals (Ahmed, 2016). They remain invisible to anyone invested in not recognizing forms of normalized violence, denying certain (different) bodies or processes the privilege of certain encounters (Ahmed, 2016). This transforms the question of *usage* and *accessibility* into one of *being* and *existence* (Ahmed, 2019), beyond survival. In this context, diversity work, more broadly, becomes a superficial endeavor sustaining institutional inertia, whereby different, othered bodies constantly bang their heads against brick walls in an effort to navigate or transform spaces and practices (Ahmed, 2016: 135).

Inspired by Ahmed's feminist metaphor of doors, we develop the metaphorical conceptualization of *ladders*, understood as the dynamic spaces and shifting processes used to reach career stages and objectives set by masculine standards in neoliberal academic spaces (e.g. a higher position, a different country, a prestigious committee or an editorial board). Using the notion of *ladders*, we seek to question and challenge the assumed linearity of passage, continuity and access in neoliberal academia. In our understanding, just like doors are not just open and/or shut but might revolve, shrink in size, be locked temporarily or be easily accessible, *ladders* are challenging to understand and negotiate. Even though our everyday academic experiences of *doors* and *ladders* (and their use) may seem obvious, sometimes, marked by directions or signposted by instructions/rules, we suggest that these can be problematized. For instance, despite widespread meritocracy discourses across various academic contexts (Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; van Den Brink and Benschop, 2012a, 2012b), meritocracy is often masked by illusory signs and "rules" that explain the use of certain spaces. As such, *ladders* do not simply go up or down in a dichotomous trajectory—and going "upwards" (e.g. into a more prestigious role) does not always lead to a positive space. The signs marking *doors* inviting or restricting access, suggesting directionality and making rules visible would propose a clear and explicit path to access and progression, whereby meritocracy is in itself represented as a straightforward *ladder* that takes us to higher levels in our careers.

However, the everyday experience and application of these rules may be more nuanced. In this shifting and dynamic conceptualization, what you see is often not what you get, both in terms of rules and outcomes. This is more evident when those who set and manage the formal criteria of access do not play by the formal rules. Instead, they might follow an informal, unscripted rulebook that remains invisible to different othered groups (women, foreigners, people of color, disabled individuals, or marginalized minorities)—for example through cronyism, bullying, unethical behavior *inter alia*. In academia, institutions, more often than not, cater to the dominant groups that inhabit them, resulting in a bad fit for the *others*. *Ladders* can therefore impede or impose movement in various directions; they might promise one destination while leading astray; they might provide an enabling shortcut or lead to a spiraling downfall. Representing a way to reach different spaces—professional levels, status, people, profile and recognition—*ladders* thus problematize academic illusions such as meritocracy, equality and flexibility, as well as "linear" career progression and academic "success." We consider how *ladders* might (usually) denote more complex—and often disorienting—processes, constantly renegotiated, and repurposed, confounding across ever-changing horizontal and vertical entry and exit points, which often alter from one career stage to another.

Offering such feminist metaphorical theorizing is not about developing theory for theory's sake by (re)shuffling theoretical concepts detached from empirical investigations (Prasad, 2023). The

current conceptualization proposes theory emerging from daily embodied and affective experiences that urge us to understand how we are positioned in our professional spaces. It is grounded in the feminist principle that theory becomes more relevant the closer it gets to the skin (Ahmed, 2016) that has registered experiences of marginalization and trauma (Clavijo and Mandalaki, 2024). This principle responds to the need to depart from the abstract rhetorical and theoretical questions that traditionally shape organizational scholarship. It involves instead engaging with reflexive and responsible (also *response-able*, see also Kaasila-Pakanen and Mandalaki, 2023) explorations of the concrete events shaping our academic lives and our “academic praxis as teachers, activists, administrators, facilitators” (Zanoni et al., 2023: 1181). We believe that the hidden and unscripted dynamics of academic careers need to be rendered visible, understood and continuously (re)negotiated and managed to offer new vocabularies and languages for accessing the contextually-relevant knowledge and learning of academic and social promise. Echoing the words of a recent editorial in this journal,—such research engagement is about training our collective imagination and actions and about “walking the talk” of our scholarship by recognizing “the challenges inherent in mundane practices through which we become scholars, colleagues, authors, reviewers, editors, activists” (Zanoni et al., 2023: 1181).

To illustrate the proposed metaphorical conceptualization of *doors* and *ladders* in academic careers, in the next section we embrace collective writing explored through autoethnographic vulnerable narratives (Kaasila-Pakanen et al., 2023). We experience exposures of vulnerability here as an enabling mechanism for creating a conducive feminist space of/for care, solidarity and shared dialog (Johansson et al., 2024; Johansson and Wickström, 2022; Reedy and Haynes, 2021; Suzanne and Reiss, 2024). This challenges conventional “linear” and rationalistic ways of knowing, thinking and writing (Helin, 2020) and thus the dominant ways of conceptualizing and understanding organizational experiences, here, academic careers.

Our shared process, empirical material, and dialog

Before presenting the autoethnographic narratives, we situate our author positionalities and shared process. We consider this crucial for inhabiting the reflexivity necessary for a feminist autoethnographic text (Boncori, 2022; Pullen, 2018), particularly one that centers its theoretical proposition around the intersectional experiences of its authors (see also Ahonen et al., 2020; Einola et al., 2021). We all identify as women academics at different career stages in the field of organization studies. Amal recently started her first full-time academic position as a lecturer upon the completion of her doctorate. Ilaria is a full professor, and Emmanouela is an associate professor. At the time of writing our first draft, we had been employed in academia for 4, 18, and 9 years, respectively. We identify as Arab and “White Other” (e.g. not the predominant White race in the country of residence), living and working in countries different from those of our birth and origin in terms of nationality and socio-cultural and political contexts. We work in English, which is a second language for all of us, and we often feel lost in translation in our academic work and writing (Barros and Alcadipani, 2023). Thus, our professional academic experiences are entrenched in foreignness, understood in relation to lived experience and social context rather than mere citizenship. In this conception, individuals who are veritably foreign (in addition to being rendered thus) (see Strauß and Boncori, 2020, for a conceptualization of foreignness) can experience complexity in navigating *doors* and *ladders* as they become familiar with foreign contexts and the taken-for-granted assumptions therein.

This project started in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic when the three of us met online and discussed the challenges and opportunities we each experience(d) within academia. By conducting this methodological experiment through a relational autoethnographic dialog rooted in

feminist vulnerability, we collectively helped each other express and interrogate sites of marginalization and privilege. Relational autoethnography (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013; Karalis Noel et al., 2023) is an approach centered in “collaborative witnessing,” fostering the development of a narrative on the lives of others through shared storytelling and conversation (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013: 366). This witnessing is premised on openness and feminist vulnerability and is enabled through dialogic co-creation and active listening. In this way, we engaged in relational autoethnographic making by working together in the re/shaping of narratives and empathetically bearing witness to each other’s experiences (Ellis and Rawicki, 2013: 366; see also Kaasila-Pakanen et al., 2023; Sai et al., 2024). Relational autoethnography has allowed us to make sense of structural and individual barriers hindering our academic lives, as well as navigate the meanings, implicit assumptions and socio-cultural tensions emerging from our experiences. With this text, we wish to share further afield our experiences in the hope that these may resonate with others.

Our initial stories and sharing motivated our writing and theorization, in addition to our future encounters developed in parallel to the writing process; we shared our experiences over many virtual conversations and wrote (about) them down (and vice versa). Exploring our individual personal experiences and putting them in dialog with each other exposed each of our positionalities, different forms of marginalization and privileges related to our identifying characteristics (e.g. identifying as a racialized minority, involving different requirements for visa/work/promotion/probation) across different career stages. These stories then prompted initial reflection and theorizing around doors and ladders, inspired especially by Sara Ahmed’s work, which we were all engaging with while working on other academic projects. For instance, during our sharing, the second author reflected on the disorienting character of shifting goals, norms and requirements across her career and how what was beneficial and even enjoyable in earlier stages of her career (networking) now often felt daunting, forced and filled with expectation. This reflection led us to metaphors that convey the changing, trickier, and unspoken realities of this professional context, challenging simplistic and binary notions of academic careers. For the final paper, our oral and written conversations materialized in/through three narratives, focusing on significant or emblematic episodes revolving around *doors* and *ladders* (due to space constraints). In presenting examples of critical events from an autoethnographic perspective (Dashper, 2016), and for ethical considerations, we have been mindful to not expose or mirror individuals involved in the described events. While these vignettes offer snapshots of a moment in time, the proposed metaphors of *doors* and *ladders* therein are dynamic and shifting to this date (for instance, the first author now is in a less precarious position as a lecturer, after her PhD completion, while facing different challenges than those articulated when we started this project).

This dialogical relationship between experience and theory facilitated making sense of the privileges, challenges and vulnerabilities to which we each have access, considering our distinct positionalities as foreign women academics. The writing of the narratives thus followed an abductive and iterative logic whereby we moved between theory and experience, submitting to the surprises of a relational research process (Merilainen et al., 2022). Creating this relational feminist space allowed us to enter into a meaningful dialog with each other through slowness and alterity (Ericsson and Kostera, 2020; Helin, 2013). This process, rooted in a feminist ethics of care (Pullen and Rhodes, 2015, 2021), fostered sensibility and sensitivity toward each other, our differences and the work that we do (Helin, 2020). As in recovery, the process proved healing as we found solace, even temporarily, both in each other and our collective writing and were able to acknowledge and manage challenges in our respective academic lives (Clavijo and Mandalaki, 2024). Urged by a desire to challenge the notion of the unencumbered, ideal academic, we agreed early on that embracing vulnerability would be key to our process. Recognizing the ontological vulnerability that intertwines embodied lives (Butler, 2009; Segal, 2023), we acknowledged our differences and

similarities without intending to assimilate our individual subjectivities behind a comfortable “we.” We employed vulnerability as a relational methodological tool, a feminist resource and praxis (Helin, 2020; Rozmarin, 2021), sharing narratives that foregrounded our respective privileges and struggles (both personal and professional), avoiding reductive typological “representations” that claim generalizability. This allowed us to surface our situated embodied truths and affects by practicing empathy and compassion toward each other, which resisted attachment to the neoliberal metrics of output and performance, including the “rigor” shaping data analysis and academic theorizing (Ashcraft, 2017). At times, this involved making more space—or indeed, taking up the whole space—for one of us within a meeting. Having our concerns heard and validated fostered room for collective healing through sharing (Boncori, 2022; Clavijo and Mandalaki, 2024; Suzanne and Reiss, 2024). This also meant that, although we did not experience major power struggles and disagreements within the team, we engaged in honest conversations about what we were each able to contribute, when and how, including during the revision processes requiring, typically, significant coordination and relational reflection when replying to reviewers’ constructive comments care-fully.

Viewing vulnerability as an aspect of shared lives rather than an individual or collective attribute, we explored the complex vocabularies of autonomy and interdependence involved in feminist vulnerable sharing; this offered a network of support for making sense of and (even partially) responding to our respective situations (Segal, 2023). Our overall approach prioritized relational care and well-being over academic schedules, while navigating frustrations arising from workloads, moments of overload, personal struggles or from the hard care work involved in the sustenance of our vulnerable process (Kipp and Hawkins, 2022). We experienced vulnerability as strength (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018), in opposition to neoliberal discourses viewing vulnerability as weakness or victimhood (Corlett et al., 2019). Vulnerable sharing as a feminist practice for reflecting on academic careers (Sai et al., 2024) facilitated and leveraged the immediate, affective, sensorial and exposing nature of our exchanges and writing, bypassing some of the filtering (and sanitizing) traditionally imposed in academic narratives. This process involved care, trust, openness and respect toward the different, irreducible other (Gibson, 2003) and in our shared process of researching and writing together.

Our autoethnographic voices

Amal

Reflecting back on the last few years of my life, I can see how my intersectional identities conditioned my sensemaking of the different doors and ladders currently existing in my trajectory. It’s been the toughest four years of my life, particularly with the precarious liminality of my multiple identities and my labor, trying to navigate and negotiate different places, spaces and, may I dare say, some toxic people as well. I moved to the U.K. as a student immigrant in late 2018, alone with my two children, to start my funded PhD program. I can still feel the excitement in my bones and my goosebumping skin as I read the university email stating that I had been chosen out of many for this funded studentship. It was an opportunity for me to establish a better life, a future for myself and my children, where we could get to be our true selves without worrying about societal penalties or judgments. Back then, I felt that this PhD studentship was a new door of opportunity with a hope for a new, bright beginning. So, I fled my home and escaped the gendered, classed and cultural silencing, dominance and oppression, to allow myself rebirth.

With the implicitly communicated and normalized power differences across the academic hierarchy, many experiences are silenced and rendered invisible. As a foreigner, a single parent, a

Middle Eastern woman of color and a full-time PhD student, I experienced ladders on different fronts, not the least of which was the systemic barrier in relation to my legal status in the U.K. and my very precarious visa situation as a student immigrant with no access to any institutional security or support. Other ladders included professional impediments as a foreigner, PhD and early career researcher coming from a completely different professional background and context with unfamiliarity with academia or the U.K. academic system; the personal struggle of childcare and single parenting, as well as the financial ladder of being the family's sole provider living on a student's income of £1,200 a month. With all these intersecting ladders to manage, I was in an extremely vulnerable position. I spent my first year navigating different domains, between my attempts to adapt to changes of language, culture, institution and academic system, supporting my children to cope with the new life, finding affordable childcare support for my toddler while trying to understand the challenging and confusing "rules of the game" within U.K. academia, which does not come with a manual or catalog for "newcomers." It was very lonely at times, especially when I was constantly reminded by the system and the people of how "foreign" I am. This foreignness was not only associated with my invisible precarious visa situation (materialized upon my arrival in the U.K., where one of my compulsory visa requirements included registering any changes to my personal status at the police station), but also linked to my visibly "different" material body, where people in different formal and informal spaces comment(ed) on my "exotic" skin, curly hair and, most commonly, my Middle Eastern English "accent."

As I tried to "fit in" within the system as a PhD student at this time, and even now as an early career researcher, looking at the hierarchy from the bottom is in itself a major ladder. It looks so steep, so out of reach, especially when I know I will be climbing this ladder alone, carrying all the financial and care/ing burdens [on the climb], while being aware of my gender, race/ethnicity and the complexities surrounding them as I ascend the academic ladder.

After spending two years of my PhD trying and struggling to interpret, understand and navigate the many structural ladders (many of them remain either vague or still unknown to me), I came to realize that with this "leaning out" system, if I am to exist, I need to lean in and create new doors, my own space, for myself, by myself. Creating these doors meant putting myself out there, networking, working all day, every day, while balancing and juggling childcare and domestic work. The last few years of my life consumed me, running in a maze, without knowing where it would actually end: submit a paper for this conference or special issue, attend a networking event or a workshop, write a research grant application or a manuscript, reflect on feedback for my thesis chapter, deliver a talk, find a part-time teaching opportunity, attend meetings, teach modules, mark assignments – while at the same time, checking immunization – taking care of a sick child, following school requirements, cleaning, cooking, paying for a trip, checking bills, attending a parent evening or resolving a school conflict. With COVID-19 hitting everyone's life, things got worse. It exacerbated my circumstances because it meant additional home-schooling and childcare responsibilities when I was used to having time to work while my children were at school and/or nursery. Yet, recognizing that I only had less than two years to finish my PhD, I started to push myself and work harder during the lockdown. I started to learn how to "play by the rules of the game," which, by the third year of my PhD, affected my physical health and mental well-being.

Throughout the last four years, as I continued running through my many different mazes, only now I can see the cost of performing, complying with and trying to "keep up" with the academic "rules of the game." With my relentless effort to find and create doors, I overlooked my body when it kept screaming "slow down, rest, take a break." I went through major surgeries, long episodes of depression and anxiety and had to go off my PhD and work for months. Most of these "ladder" experiences have been silenced due to power differentials and systemic injustices. In academia, you are judged based on your "visible" research output, which opens up doors for your academic

future; but the emotional, physical and mental labor you invested in the processes and circumstances surrounding this “output” remain unsaid and unseen. With my PhD funding and visa status coming to an end, I started as soon as I could to apply for academic jobs in the U.K., a few months before submitting my thesis. Due to my ‘visible’ research outputs, I got shortlisted for four positions, and was offered the post in two institutions, which was a “door” to officially start an academic career. Yet, with my intersectionality, the doors come with their own ladders and sometimes, the boundaries between doors and ladders are blurry; even with this door of a new full-time academic position, I remain restricted and constrained with limited freedom of “choice.” For example, even when I assumed that being in a full-time academic job would offer some security, this door opened up a new ladder to navigate (e.g. meeting probation requirements).

As I attempted to explore different doors throughout my PhD journey, I was looking for my “soul tribe.” However, the path of finding them was anything but linear. Some individuals embedded within the academic system may become your ladder, acting as gatekeepers and mirroring the brutality of the system until they become the system. With the “rewarded” and naturalized neoliberal, individualistic and competitive academic practices, caring, empathetic and ethical practices become undervalued and discounted. Some privileged, entitled and powerful individuals silence you, plant seeds of doubt, raise your imposter voice and make you question yourself, or, if you belong, guard and shut different doors of opportunities in your face.

Other individuals, however, are doors. They subvert this toxic effect with care by supporting early career researchers, guiding them, offering advice and helping them build confidence. I was very lucky to establish connections and nurture relationships with like-minded academics who apply ethics of care. They played a key role in my journey. They were/are my door, and that of other early career researchers, of hope and belonging in academia. They made me realize my own responsibility toward others and how I can pay forward and be someone else’s door. For example, now that I have finished my PhD, I use my early career experience and reach out to PhD colleagues to share some of the key ladders I have experienced as a PhD, which might help them navigate vague processes (e.g. PhD progression, manuscript writing and reviewing), or introduce them to different networks, share special issue calls/vacant positions, or initiate research projects with them. Most importantly, across the different teaching and research responsibilities, I try to pay it forward by prioritizing, caring for, about and with others by enacting care in everyday academic tasks such as writing a manuscript review, an assignment feedback or an email response.

Ilaria

Looking back at my career in higher education, now that I am a full professor and have been an academic for almost 20 years, I feel at once privileged, happy and disillusioned. As a part-time PhD student and a full-time lecturer in the U.K., I was told that once you have permanency, things are fine. But it’s a complicated system, with rules that are different from those I knew back home and many unspoken norms. Nobody really cares about professors, or wonders how they are doing, or if they need help – petty as it sounds as I write this. I can hear my younger self saying “boo-hoo, poor you with a professorial salary, an open-ended contract and friends in high places.” And that’s true – I have those privileges. But it’s not that simple. Once I made it to Associate Professor, I was proud and exhausted. I could see the mirage of full professorship getting closer in terms of a career ladder, but also appearing far due to systemic barriers, work/well-being balance and the needs of a small and growing family. Working as a foreigner comes at a cost, as living abroad means being away from your dear ones, not having trusted support networks and building everything from scratch – including friendships and professional collaborations. Making full Professor and becoming a Dean was a big deal for me, as I had never actually thought I would reach that level—a

woman just over 40 years old, a foreigner, a mother and a wife. But the relentless neoliberal system never stops. I am still hustling, and I have about 25 years before I can retire.

One of the tricky aspects of this job, especially for foreign women academics, is that there are a lot of invisible doors and ladders, hard to find, navigate and unlock. As a foreign woman, I still often don't grasp the British passive-aggressiveness, the "proper" way of doing things, the unofficial processes and hierarchies that need to be respected and followed to achieve certain goals. Challenges don't reduce in number as you progress; they are just dissimilar, and sometimes, they are harder to see or get through. You don't really know what is behind some doors or whether the ladders will take you up or down. I work on inclusivity and equity, and as inspiring as this can sound, it is also a poisoned chalice in many aspects, navigating: the high-level dynamics of personal, group and institutional interest; the burden of representation and heavy workloads; the risks involved in speaking up against injustice; the emotional labor and mental toll; the challenge of tokenism and box ticking; the time and work that goes mostly unrecognized in performance measurements, rewards systems and recognitions. Over the years these become harder to navigate because one acquires more responsibilities and more visibility along the way, while doors and ladders remain continuously shifting, negotiated and temporary. It is a perpetual and disorienting structure that gives you the illusion of a clear direction through meritocracy and hard work. Once you reach what you thought was your goal, the door has shrunk, or moved, or is locked, without a clear pattern. It feels like a surrealist tale, where Alice in Wonderland meets the magic staircases from Harry Potter in a game of snakes and ladders.

My first door of opportunity, I guess, was my ability to escape the nepotist system of my country of origin and go abroad with a scholarship. I became an academic almost by chance when a friend told me about a job vacancy in the department where her roommate worked, which sounded like something I was qualified for. I got my first contract as a university teacher, and I really enjoyed it. After a couple of years, I moved countries again, opting for a place that seemed more focused on what you do and what you know, rather than on whom.

I must admit that working in the U.K. has been a privilege because, as imperfect as the system is here, in my home country, I would never have been able to access these opportunities at the age that I did and without being somebody's daughter or "girlfriend." But over the years, I have learned that U.K. academia is great at creating criteria and rules, which present an image of fairness and equity, without necessarily always walking the talk. In reality, when organizations need to make appointments or retain funding, for example, back doors and private arrangements are found, if needed, like everywhere else. For years, I focused on abiding by the rules, on following official processes and improving myself, without fully appreciating that people (especially gatekeepers, mentors and collaborators) are the key to understanding and navigating academic doors and ladders: some push you down a ladder and others unlock doors. Some people will go on the journey with you and cheer you on, and some will invisibly hold the key to the control panel of the ladder's merry-go-round, but not for you. There are wonderful colleagues who guide others through caring embrace, and fake allies who will play smoke and mirrors, only to send you off track. In today's neoliberal academia, soaked in competition and hyper-performativity, positive and genuine collaborations are hard to find. Some people may be willing to help you in the early stages of your career – especially some famous women professors – but only if you do not get too close to their level, their subject of expertise and their territory. Once you become a professor and you stop being their pet project, then you become competition, and the gloves come off.

Also, in addition to changing dynamics, the neoliberal academic in the U.K. bears the burden of carving out the doors and ladders for themselves. The most beneficial doors in my career, right from the start, have been those through communities and networks that I have painstakingly sought out. Rather than concrete opportunities to go up the career ladder, these have provided something far

more important to me: a sense of belonging, mentoring, the opportunity to mentor and support others, and friendships. “Finding my tribe” of scholars with a similar approach to academic work has been an incredibly valuable resource in terms of learning and community building – which, in some cases, has also resulted in coauthoring, coediting and co-organizing. Some doors (and a few ladders) also came as a “byproduct” of those genuine relationships. Researching and writing differently, and embracing the margins, has been both a door of opportunity and a multidirectional ladder.

I have found that many doors can also hide a precipice to steep ladders. Having a family with young children has motivated me to achieve more and become focused and effective in my work. But, it has also meant less time for work and research in a profession that is premised on long working hours. I am generally exhausted by default; my evenings and weekends are occupied by family and not research; I cannot engage in mobility activities such as traveling extensively for conferences or doing visiting periods in other universities. While pregnant with a second child, I have had to say no to projects and opportunities to preserve my work-life balance, physical and mental well-being. I am forced to constantly prioritize, in life and in work, and think hard about what is really important in my life. Doors can become ladders, and vice versa, throughout our careers. They can welcome you in or push you out; they can occupy bigger spaces in your work or personal life; they can become heavier [. . .] and harder to shift or influence over time. For example, for a friendly introvert like me, with social anxiety, at the beginning, “networking” used to be a painful necessity, a door to squeeze through, but then became a joyful way to find and engage with a caring community. Networking became a ladder allowing access to opportunities that turned out to be beneficial for my promotion applications. However, at times, it now feels like a disheartening burden again – when I was in the earlier stages in my career, people’s interactions with me were more genuine and were about me. Now I am conscious that often people want something from me – a publication as an editor, an introduction as a professor, a name on a project, and so on.

I feel privileged to be in this profession. Being a full professor opens doors in itself. Now, I am encouraged to apply for roles; I get regularly headhunted for leadership jobs; I am invited to join projects, deliver keynotes, organize conferences and take on editorial positions without having to still hassle for every single opportunity. This means that I can avoid some academic predators, those who exploit you or discriminate against you because of your age, gender or foreignness. I have had many encounters with those malignant “academic vampires,” who have pushed me down several ladders, either psychologically in terms of self-esteem, or by appropriating my success and my work. So now, I try to do as much as I can to help others on their journey, implementing what I wish I had received (but didn’t) in my early career stages: mentoring; serving as co-investigator on grants and funding applications; providing feedback on papers, theses and projects; introducing early career scholars to people who could benefit them as coauthors or colleagues; writing references; acting as external assessor for promotion applications; coauthoring on projects even though these won’t “count” for the metrics my university recognizes as useful; using social media and personal networks to celebrate my colleagues’ work and help them amplify their visibility; establishing caring processes in editing and reviewing to offer nurturing, rather than abusive or transactional experiences; involving a range of colleagues in academic projects and collaborations. All these activities take time, and as a professor, time is the one thing I am in desperate need of. Is this why so many professors don’t bother with any of this? Does it even make a difference?

Emmanouela

I am 36, single and childless, coming from a southern (not “enough”) European country, which is at the root of the diverse experiences of social discrimination that I have faced. Two years ago, I was promoted to Associate Professor, so I find myself in the transition toward midcareer, but I do

not see this reflected much in how some colleagues like to reinforce hierarchies, namely, through sexist comments: “Emmanouela will do the housekeeping of the meeting” – Did I hear well?

When we started working on this, I had a foot fracture and remember having joined the first conversation from the sofa. My temporary trauma was initially experienced as a ladder, causing increased stress in relation to how it would condition my ability to deliver to the committed workload in the coming months. I think I was not really ready to accept that my embodied trauma could hinder my ability to produce the committed academic output and didn't take a sick leave. Even though my ability to work from home was a privilege, I now realize that much of this work should have been deprioritized in favor of my well-being. But, I guess, in the neoliberal academic context, taking time for self-care is a quality we rarely learn. I was feeling “ashamed” of accepting and confessing that my embodied vulnerability wouldn't allow me to “produce,” and at the same time I had so much to do that I couldn't pause. Embodied writing helped me, though, to make sense of these struggles and listen to some of my vulnerable body's whispers. It functioned as a door that made my whole working experience so much smoother. I started saying “No” more to toxic work-relationships and “Yes” to those projects that opened doors toward my ability to safeguard my well-being, go slower, accept my vulnerable sides and start doing things differently at work (but also in life, to a certain extent).

When I joined academia, I had a vague idea about what being an “academic” actually involved and (naively) thought that I was joining a space where plurality of knowledge was embraced. I felt lost, trying to figure out the surrounding dynamics, often treated unfairly as a PhD student. Once, in a research seminar, I was humiliated in public by a senior PhD colleague for not having a “robust” enough methodology: “This is a terrible methods section. How can you even present this?” It was my first PhD year (and presentation) and I felt ashamed. I thought it was all my fault and felt “useless.” I wanted to disappear, exposed as I was (“naked”) to the audience. I remained silent. I had been silenced. During my PhD, I went through various psychological ups and downs and stopped working for a few months, trying to make space for my thoughts and body to be pieced back together. I often felt helpless to navigate winding ladders and requirements: at least one top journal publication or top R&R before graduation, papers accepted to yearly top conferences (where was I supposed to find all these papers?), only targeting top journals as per “publish or perish” rules, ideally having found a job before graduation. Some of this was a foreign language to me; a mountain to climb, stretching my body in all directions. I was not yet drawing on feminist theories and writing, and I didn't even know that these possibilities existed. Maybe I was also reluctant to explore an academic voice that would marginalize me further against the normative, masculine gaze.

I now realize that feminist approaches and writing differently chose me as much as I them. They put words to my need to make sense of my (academic) life. I remember my first GWO conference: I was “just” a PhD student and a newbie in the writing differently stream, feeling so “small” next to “big” names in the field. I was so anxious and excited to finally meet the people whose academic texts made me dream and hope. Two days later, I was truly amazed by the beautiful women I had met. I still remember our conversations, the embodied texts we shared, the tears and affects we exchanged during the sessions. A door was opening. I knew I had to take a leap of faith and enter, to continue doing what my body was asking me to do: to write (from/about/through) it. Although this type of work has meant a career ascendance, I also experienced challenges due to this, often finding it hard to integrate in the research culture of business schools or to respond to reviewers' comments: “What do you mean by embodiment?” “How is it possible to do research/write from the body?” “Is this academic enough?” “What? poetry?” Such comments were etched like small bruises on my body. But an inner voice in me whispered: “Keep up,” supported by caring colleagues, editors and reviewers, in whose hands I was lucky to have some of my work land and be cared for/about/with.

A few years later, I was looking for a job. I was unsure whether presenting an embodied writing piece would be “appropriate” for a job talk. I was applying for a critical management studies position, where doing work on embodiment wouldn’t be “an issue,” but I decided to present a more “academic” paper to be on the “safe side.” Even though the job talk went really well, I received the feedback that I was finally rejected and later learned that the reason behind this decision was my being “an assertive woman.” I was puzzled, experiencing in/on my skin what masculine academia means, even when it is purported to be “critical.” Not hiring me was an indirect way to silence m-y-our “assertive” voice.

Later in my career, I experienced public bullying for an academic publication. I had lost my sleep and voice for many days, feeling deeply alone, quite low psychologically and physically with frequent anxiety attacks. I was silenced and ashamed, feeling the unfairness and injustice in every cell of my body. I had just applied for promotion and was convinced that this event would condition the outcome negatively. “Why” was the huge question echoing in me. But I never wondered “Why me.” I saw this all as an attack against different forms of knowledge, the whole burgeoning stream on writing differently and the feminist struggles it comes to voice. As a woman academic in her early career and as a foreigner, I was an “easy target.” How could I fight back? I often didn’t know which direction to look at, which door to knock on, which hand to trust. My legs were weak from jumping up and down; my body was bruised from bumping right and left. I was tired, angry, sad, ashamed and worried. But the support of the feminist community, expressed in various ways, was tremendously empowering: daily discussions and supportive messages by colleagues, collaborative writing projects, editors and reviewers’ supportive readings of my work, colleagues and PhD students’ messages expressing appreciation for my writing and support, invitations to join journals’ editorial boards, webinars and/or research seminars and, luckily, an academic institution supportive of my work (as shown in my grade promotion and invitations to assume leadership positions at the school). Being part of supportive collegial circles streamlined some of these ladders and opened doors for me to enter into caring, or at least more plural, spaces. Notwithstanding the emotional labor and challenges that can surround such resonant collegial encounters (for instance, mediating tensions or inadvertently hierarchizing vulnerabilities), being part of feminist communities makes things look clearer and reassuring. I feel grateful and privileged for all the beautiful people, friends and co-writers I have met. The more I grow as a feminist researcher and writer, and today as a PhD supervisor and editor for critical journals, the more I recognize my capacity and responsibility to open doors and remove ladders for others when possible. From offering an attentive listening ear to others’ vulnerabilities, providing constructive feedback and opportunities for authors to publish, supporting job applications, being caring with PhD students and other student supervision/teaching, overworking to ensure I deliver work commitments or replace colleagues on leave (especially as a childless woman!) to putting extra effort into article revisions – even when not reflected in authorship (!) – and doing my best to mediate conflicts in collaborative working circles if/when needed. I feel that I am investing significant amounts of emotional, physical and embodied (beyond intellectual) labor to ensure that collaborations stand up to my feminist values. Albeit fulfilling, some of it often comes at the expense of self-care and is thus experienced as a ladder – I might simply feel exhausted physically and emotionally. I guess it is often hard to set clear boundaries between the private and the public, the personal and the professional, and thus between how events might be experienced as doors or ladders. Learning how to navigate academic workloads, relationships and collaborations is key to making sure that ladders can be turned into doors, when possible, in consideration of different positionalities. I guess “care” is the magic word, especially when put into practice.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this paper, we reflect on our academic career experiences from within our situated intersectional positionalities, developing the metaphors of *doors* and *ladders* to shed light on the complex dynamics shaping academic careers in neoliberal spaces. Specifically, we draw and build on Sara Ahmed's metaphor of *doors* and place it in dialog with the metaphor of *ladders* that Ahmed's conceptualization of *doors* inspired, exposing several intricacies in academic careers for intersectional women academics. Our account contributes to feminist work exploring the conceptual potentials of metaphors, especially in relation to understanding academic careers within the neoliberal academic context. Theoretically, we challenge neoliberal approaches rooted in the linearity in/of academic careers, extending feminist metaphorical conceptualizations such as the "ivory tower" and the "glass ceiling" (Bourabain, 2021; Morley, 1994; Robinson et al., 2023); albeit informative, these metaphors leave the complexity of academic careers largely unattended. The proposed conceptualization, supported by embodied autoethnographic narratives, rather highlights the movement and temporal dynamics of the *doors* and *ladders* we each face in our academic career trajectories, surfacing the complexity and messiness of intersectional embodied experiences in the academic professional context (Sai et al., 2024).

Engaging with "researching and writing differently," we explore the powers of exposing and sharing feminist vulnerability through a relational autoethnographic approach embraced both as a principle and as a praxis (Johansson et al., 2024; Kaasila-Pakanen et al., 2023; Karalis Noel et al., 2023; Suzanne and Reiss, 2024). We offer personal accounts, drawing on our experiences as foreign women academics at different career stages, maintaining our three stories separate (though often interconnected) to ensure that the collective "we" does not erase the individual voices. Relatedly, we avoid presenting a reductive mapping of similarities and differences across the stories, or the explicit articulation of each *door* and *ladder* and their "exact" meanings in those specific circumstances. We resist over-simplification often grounded in epistemic arrogance and/or space constraints in academic writing. While we highlight some similarities and differences in our experiences, we thus recognize the impossibility of articulating these under conventional analytical patterns and formats (Thanem and Knights, 2019). Through this autoethnographic feminist relational practice in reading and writing (Clavijo and Mandalaki, 2024), we rather wish to leave some detangling to you, dear reader, inviting you to put the emergent ideas and learnings in dialog with your own experiences and imagination. Echoing Robinson et al. (2023: 4), "we encourage you [the reader] to draw such connections and tensions for yourself, and to take away your own key themes and inspiration[s]" in this ongoing dialog.

Reflecting on the narratives led us to realize that *doors* and *ladders* can play different roles and take different forms, from leading somewhere and/or being experienced as restrictions to pointing to a change in direction. In our conceptualization, what *doors* and *ladders* "do" is never predetermined and cannot be easily navigated through dichotomies (i.e. upwards/downwards; in/out; positive/negative). Further, we suggest that how we experience the very same *doors* and *ladders* can change according to a multitude of factors, which render academic career progression and performance more complex than anticipated. Such complexities stress the blurred boundaries of meaning and understanding around academic *doors* and *ladders*, highlighting differences in their use and access, and the many power imbalances shaping them. We thus propose *doors* and *ladders* as dynamic metaphors requiring constant interpretation and negotiation, bound by movement and temporality.

Although some of our experiences point to similar *doors* and *ladders*, as reflected in our narratives, these do not necessarily hold the same weight and space for each of us, in view of our career stage and respective positionality. The narratives expose a strong temporal dimension to such

dynamics: while *doors* and *ladders* change/shift/disorient over time, their negotiations and barriers can change or be maintained from doctoral studies to full professorship. This observation further problematizes the myth of meritocracy and linear career path discourses in neoliberal academia, revealing how such illusory meritocratic doors and ladders might actually involve secret passages and shortcuts for some, while impeding or blocking access for others. Our experiences also reveal the changing character of academic careers (e.g. requirements or expectations), which blurs the distinction between *doors* and *ladders* and their qualities. For instance, one experience (like authorship and academic collaboration) can be embodied as a door, allowing access to positive outcomes for some or the closure of a portal of benefit to others; a senior role can become a ladder to a high-level promotion or a fast descent into bullying due to power dynamics and workload-induced poor mental health. As individuals, we approach doors and ladders from distinct positions, personal circumstances and professional contexts that may render us marginalized or privileged at different times, within heteronormative, ableist academic contexts. While *doors* might take time to reach and unlock, the threshold is usually crossed with one step. *Ladders*, however, involve multiple steps and a gradient, while neither doors nor ladders possess inherently positive or negative qualities. We rather argue for their ever-shifting, often co-existing and non-binary becoming, which can take different forms as we progress in our academic careers.

Reflecting on our narratives collectively, we also realized that *doors* and *ladders* are not fixed but moving. Events that might be experienced as upward *ladders* at one career stage might be experienced as smoother downhill climbs or even *doors* into/out of groups in another, and vice versa. For instance, even with our shared foreignness, Amal, as a foreign PhD student in a precarious position, contemplated the possible achievement of academic tenure as a steep *ladder*, while Ilaria and Emmanouela experienced tenure as a *door* opening up opportunities and more professional security. Similarly, Ilaria 18 years of experience as an academic and her role now as a Professor opened a number of beneficial *doors*, revealing a wealth of opportunities and an awareness of their potential. However, this same *door* of experience and professorship status is often experienced as a *ladder* now for Amal and Emmanouela, leading to different unanticipated pathways and directions, further exacerbated by the steepness of the neoliberal academic hierarchy and progression. This suggests that the same upward direction in “ladders” of tenure, ranking and years of experience in an early academic career can transform into open or revolving *doors* at a more advanced career stage, allowing for greater or fewer opportunities or enhanced access to certain spaces. As such, what one person might experience as an unlockable or gated *door* given their tenure and positionality in a particular situation, or due to (in)experience in navigating the context, someone else might experience as an upward *ladder*, navigated smoothly or through steep steps.

Further, Emmanouela explains how embodied writing and feminist relationality function as *doors* for her, unlocking spaces, while also acknowledging emotional challenges therein that might even temporarily be experienced as *ladders* (e.g. whether she should present an “embodied paper” in a “job talk,” or the emotional and physical fatigue involved in the care work she invests in her collaborations—Kipp and Hawkins, 2022). Similarly, for Ilaria, this type of writing has been both a positive ladder to publications and promotions and a shifting ladder, leading to marginalization and the closing of some doors. Hence, the same events might be lived differently by different intersectional women academics—often both as *doors* and *ladders* (considering different aspects of the experience)—across varying horizontal and vertical configurations in the career progression.

With the above insights, this paper also contributes to recent critical scholarly debates investigating professional experiences of foreign women academics in neoliberal working spaces (Abdellatif et al., 2021; Gao and Sai, 2020; Mandalaki and Prasad, 2024); such explorations have so far focused mainly on qualitative inquiry through interviews (Johansson and Śliwa, 2014; Sang et al., 2013; Sang and Calvard, 2019; Strauß and Boncori, 2020). For foreign women academics,

the dynamics of workplace sensemaking processes are further challenged by a lack of networks and by discrimination (Niemann, 2012) and socio-cultural (mis)understandings (Strauß and Boncori, 2020). Specifically, our experiences reveal foreignness predominantly as a shared ladder through which we navigate “visible” and hidden dynamics.² For foreign women, invisibility can be linked to silencing (see Fox-Kirk et al., 2020) and secrecy (see Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2013), whereby individuals and organizations can consciously and covertly engage in the withholding of information, processes and opportunities to privilege or marginalize others. The literature also discusses the restricted possibilities for promotion or inclusion in leadership boards for foreign women academics (Bell et al., 2021). Even in situations when there seem to be visible doors of opportunity (e.g. being a member of a research committee or taking on a leading/coordinating role), we suggest that the lack of familiarity around the signage or “rules” makes it hard to grasp that some *doors* can lead to a precipice or be *ladders* in disguise. Thus, for foreign women academics, the (in)visibility of, or lack of access to, some *doors*, and the ambiguity surrounding the “rules” of their use, represents a challenge that can become a *ladder* (an enabling or limiting one) across different career stages. We might face additional challenges, needing support to navigate unspoken rules, nuances and the vagueness of foreign norms, creating uncertainty as per what is to be found behind these *doors* and *ladders*.

Hence, the proposed metaphorical conceptualization makes visible the changing dynamics, challenges and questions of access to both metaphors in the purpose and usage of academic spaces and processes (i.e. when and why we are confronted with (un)usable spaces and objects). Echoing Ahmed’s (2019) argument, we note that as processes permitting or restricting access (and direction), *doors* and *ladders* often come with (illusory or misleading) instructions on how these can be used: who is allowed access, (who is not) and when. We suggest that it is important to question who sets the criteria of access or exclusion to and from academic *doors* and *ladders*, who can change/manipulate them and who is able to interpret them in this professional context. Problematizing dynamics of power, privilege and inclusion in the neoliberal academic context (Huber, 2022), our narratives also stress the importance of considering concrete actions that we can each take as we advance our careers.

We also realize that masculine and neoliberal academic loci are often premised on a “use it or lose it” principle (Ahmed, 2019). As academics, we are either acquainted with and obedient to the “rules” to go up the career ladder in the “right way” (e.g. abiding by rules on what and how to publish and how to be a “successful” academic) or pushed down and out through the “exit *ladder*.” Even when *doors* may seem to be visibly marked or open for us to go through (e.g. through promotion criteria), our narratives and insights reveal that they rarely create supportive structures or communicate clear processes and/or pathways to success. The existing system does not always welcome *others* into spaces that offer the conditions necessary for them to thrive academically, enhancing uncertainty and confusion. We thus second Norman’s (1995: 1–2) questioning of the usability of a door, highlighting the confusion that can derive from it:

How can such a simple thing as a door be so confusing? . . . Should you push or pull, to the left or the right? . . . The design of the door should indicate how to work it without any need for signs, certainly without any need for trial and error.

Further, our reflections suggest that while *ladders* are often institutionally created, reproduced and embedded (e.g. impenetrable academic bureaucracy, “publish or perish,” probation criteria), *doors* are mostly constructed individually—either by one alone or within a community of people—to navigate discriminating dynamics and find alternative paths and possibilities. Consequently, while the hyper-performativity and excessive workloads common to neoliberal academic contexts are

often purported to be individual burdens (see Boncori et al., 2020), our experiences show that the challenges we often think are due to an individual's not being "good enough" are in fact systemic occurrences. We suggest that creating spaces of/for sharing vulnerability to show the everyday complexities of academic careers is a valuable feminist praxis with emancipatory potential. Sharing our struggles and successes with vulnerability, care and respect for difference matters, enabling collective healing and recovery (Boncori, 2022; Clavijo and Mandalaki, 2024). It allows embodying one's otherness without having to justify oneself or be caught by the fear and anxiety of discrimination (Suzanne and Reiss, 2024). This text thus problematizes untold professional stories of struggle, failure and sensemaking, extending ongoing feminist scholarly discussions on intersectional women academics' careers in neoliberal spaces, where various forms of privilege dominate, while diverse expressions of difference and otherness are systemically contested, rendered invisible and silenced (Bourabain, 2021; Morley, 1994; Robinson et al., 2023; Sai et al., 2024). Through this work, we heed calls to (re)surface and question vested academic practices to reclaim our ability to inhabit our work and the relevance of intersectional embodied experiences for developing theory (Ahmed, 2016).

We invite future research to offer more empirical investigations of *othered* marginalized academic identities, to disentangle how the dynamics of *doors* and *ladders* might be lived differently across different academic contexts. Through the creative potential of feminist metaphors, we here propose theory that emerges as and through work in our lives (Ahmed, 2016); this provides us with relevant conceptual lenses for giving political, intellectual and social meaning to our stories.

. . . *In Solidarity*. . .

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Notes

1. Whiteness is referred to here as an institution (Ahmed, 2016) and not as a biological characteristic.
2. We also acknowledge that in today's internationalized academia, international profiles, often perceived as exotic, are privileged in recruitment decisions for meeting neoliberal business schools' internationalization objectives. While this might offer initial access to academic positions, it still denotes instrumentalization of foreignness in neoliberal academia, instrumentalization not valorized consistently throughout the career.

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